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**Athena and Hermes in Early Greek Poetry:
Doubling and Complementarity**

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No Greek god is simple; except perhaps Ares. All the others hold out mysteries not easily solved, regarding their origins and evolving functions, their combination of diverse and even contradictory attributes, and the sometimes great discontinuity between the way they are figured in cult worship and in literature. These ambiguities are further complicated when we raise questions about the gods' relationship to one another within either realm, be it cult or literature.

It is commonly accepted that the first poets, Homer and Hesiod, had a disproportionate and perhaps distorting influence on the characterization of the Olympian divinities¹. The poets' storytelling purposes may well have deliberately and artificially molded the Greek gods, originally a heterogeneous collection, into a seemingly well-integrated community consisting of Zeus, Hera, and their children, with lesser powers occupying peripheral roles. The shapers of these epic and cosmogonic traditions were perhaps influenced by the models offered by Greek family and community life². Accordingly, we find many incidents of Olympian interacting with Olympian, whether to collude, confute, deceive, or seduce; or in the service of such other transactions as human members of a community or a household are prone to engage in.

But there seems to exist a considerable gap between this literary portrait of the gods as an anthropomorphized Olympian 'community' and the gods as worshipped on the cultic level in Greek cities and shrines³. Greek religion, at its

¹ Herod. 2. 53: "Homer and Hesiod first made a theogony for the Greeks, giving the gods their special names and allotting them their offices, occupations, and forms". It is also noteworthy how some of the early philosophers automatically group Homer and Hesiod together as giving the Greeks a common (and erroneous) portrayal of their divinities: Xenophanes B11, A1.18 (D-K), Heraclitus B 56 (D-K).

² G. Sissa and M. Detienne, *La vita quotidiana degli dei greci*, Bari 1989, *passim* (ed. orig. *La vie quotidienne des dieux grecs*, Paris 1989).

³ Sissa and Detienne put it well: (*Ibid.*, p. 131= ed. orig., p. 166): "Da una parte, in altorilievo, la società degli dei fortemente individualizzati, che abitano le dimore dell'Olimpo, gli Olimpi che posseggono il vasto cielo, gli dei luminosi dell'*Iliade* che assaporano nettare e ambrosia, molto lontani dalla terra. Dall'altra, più in basso, in bassorilievo, i primi siti cultuali, per i quali i discendenti di quella stessa gracile stirpe hanno sgombrato i pendii: i luoghi dove si depongono le offerte, radi dapprima, poi sempre più fitti, e che mostrano i tratti caratteristici dell'iscrizione degli dei sul suolo, fra gli uomini che camminano sulla terra. Sono tratti assolutamente nuovi rispetto agli dei olimpici di Omero...".

fundamental level of belief and practice, consisted of worship of a specific deity (or sometimes a pair of deities) at a specific shrine for a specific need or function. A given city or district was often especially attached to one Olympian god, with temples and altars of other deities also present for particularized needs. And so when gods do appear in a work of literature, we must assume that while they display powers and characteristics not radically at variance with those of their institutionalized or civic roles within Greek communities, they are to a considerable extent the creatures of a fictionalized world that may owe as much to the mythpoetic imagination as to the realities of daily belief and practice. It is the Greek gods of this world of the imagination that are my primary concern.

Within this theoretical framework, I focus on Athena and Hermes in the imaginative world of early Greek poetry and myth. Given that these two Olympians have no apparent similarities in character or realms of interest and function, nevertheless in Homer and the mythic tradition they display an unexpected degree of overlap. Here are some striking points of similarity.

1) In the Olympian Council that opens the *Odyssey*, Zeus decides to send Athena to Ithaca and Hermes to Ogygia in exactly parallel roles to stir father and son into action.

2) Both Athena and Hermes speed to these missions with winged sandals as their characteristic attribute⁴.

3) Both have the power to bestow invisibility on their favorites or to use invisibility strategically⁵. Thus there is a close parallel between Athena's covering Odysseus with a mist of invisibility to guide him safely to Alkinoos and Arete in *Odyssey* 7, and Hermes' making Priam invisible to guide him safely to Achilles in *Iliad* 24.

4) In *Odyssey* 10, a section of the narrative where Athena has dropped out of her role as Odysseus' divine helper⁶, Hermes intervenes in what is normally Athena's role to give the hero protection against Kirke's powers⁷.

⁴ *Od.* 1. 96-98 (Athena) and 5. 44-46 (Hermes). Commentators have considered these sandals as properly belonging to Hermes, and viewed 1. 96-98 as an interpolation. I prefer to see it as a formulaic transference from Hermes to Athena based on the two deities' association elsewhere in mythic tradition (below, note 5).

⁵ Athena makes Odysseus invisible at *Od.* 7. 14 f., and a lesser form of invisibility is seen in the disguise she magically bestows on him at 13. 429 ff., insofar as the beggar will have 'social invisibility' amongst the Suitors. Athena and Hermes help Perseus to secure the cap of invisibility in the account given by Apollodorus (note 8 below). Hermes is also, like Athena, adept in the use of disguise as a way of making the true nature of things invisible, as when he disguises the direction of the hoofprints of Apollo's cattle, and invents sandals to make his own tracks unrecognizable, *H. Herm.* 75-86, 222-225. Hesiod tells us that Hermes' son was Autolykos (fr. 64 M-W) and that he had the power to make cattle invisible (fr. 67 M-W).

⁶ She may be absent because this section (Books 9-12) is narrated by Odysseus and it is only the poet-narrator who has the omniscient perspective needed to describe Athena's interventions; or because Athena harbors some resentment over the theft of the palladium and will remain angry at Odysseus until their rapprochement in Book 13.

⁷ The theory that Hermes was Odysseus' regular divine patron and helper in a pre-Homeric tradition, and that Homer has covered up this earlier tradition but left some traces showing, is developed in J. Russo, 'A Jungian Analysis of Homer's Odysseus', in P. Young-Eisendrath and T. Dawson, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Jung*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 240-254.

To these instances from early epic we may add an example from a myth that is clearly very old:

5) In the hero Perseus' quest against the Gorgon, Athena and Hermes join forces as a pair of divine helpers, and are in a sense redundant⁸.

These parallels invite the question, *why* do Athena and Hermes sometimes share or 'double' each others' functions? My answer, I hope, will expand our understanding of these gods' complexity, and especially that of Athena⁹.

The first implication of these parallels is that some of the powers of Athena and Hermes are alternate and related versions of the same quality. For example, each god embodies the kind of clever intelligence or μῆτις that manifests itself in the clever ruse and the winning strategy. For Hermes this quality leans toward the 'night-time' realm of stealth and theft, cunning deception, and successful guidance to the underworld¹⁰; while for Athena it leans toward the 'day-time' realm of good judgement, quick thinking, and successful guidance on the battlefield. While pulling in opposite directions, the two gods' interests share a common center. Consider the qualities singled out for praise in Athena's statement to Odysseus at *Od.* 13, 330 ff.: I can never abandon you, she says, for all your unfortunate state, because "you are so clever at speech[?]¹¹, strong-minded, and intelligent",

οὐνεκ' ἐπιτήης ἐσσι καὶ ἀγχινοὸς καὶ ἐχέφρων.

⁸ The earliest references to Perseus' adventures are in Hesiod (*Theog.* 270-281, *Ehoiai* fr. 135 M-W, *Aspis* 216-237), with more details in Simonides (543 PMG) and Pindar (*Pyth.* 12. 14 f.). The first surviving evidence for the role of Athena and Hermes comes from seventh century art: see T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth*, I, Baltimore 1993, pp. 304 f. for references. The only full account is late, Apollodorus 2. 4. 2-3, where it is the three Phorcydes or Graiai who possess the sandals and cap of invisibility. They lend them to Perseus after Athena and Hermes have led him to these nymphs to acquire these necessary objects. (In Pherekydes' account, Jacoby 3 F11, only Hermes leads Perseus to the Graiai). Perseus returns them by giving them first to Hermes to give to the Phorcydes, a detail that suggests that Hermes in some sense controls these magical objects. Since Perseus gives Athena the *gorgoneion* to keep as her own attribute, it remains implicit that Hermes should come away with cap and sandals as permanent possessions and that Apollodorus' late account transmits a confused version of a double *aitton* for each deity's characteristic accoutrements. Other sources, particularly artistic representations, frequently have the cap and sandals as possessions of Hermes.

⁹ W.F. Ono, *The Homeric Gods* (ed. orig. *Die Götter Griechenlands*, Frankfurt a. M. 1947²), Boston 1964, p. 53, makes the suggestive comment: "Athena [is] the goddess of nearness. In this she resembles Hermes. Like him, she acts as guide to her favorites, and at times both she and Hermes accompany the same hero". My study may be seen as an attempt to expand this briefly stated insight into a full analysis.

¹⁰ Ono, *ibid.*, pp. 113-120 gives an eloquent assessment of Hermes' 'nocturnal' character as related to his role as psychopompos, guide of the dead. Note his significant epithet νυκτὸς ὀπιππητήρα, *H. Herm.* 15, and the closing summation of the hymn, 577 f., "in the dark of night he gives the tribe of mortals little help and endless deception".

¹¹ Unfortunately these three crucial adjectives are not all clear in meaning, ἀγχινοὸς should mean 'sagacious or tough-minded', and ἐχέφρων must mean either 'having intelligence' or 'of steadfast intelligence'. But ἐπιτήης (used also of Odysseus at 18. 128), which I construe as 'clever at speech, fluent', presents disputed etymology and sense. The seemingly related hapax ἐπιτήης in the gen. ἐπιτήῆος at 21. 306 is often taken to mean 'good treatment', an argument based on context and an improbable etymology from ἔτω. But in Athena's speech here in 13, a complimentary reference to Odysseus' clever use of speech would be most apt. Ancient tradition (the scholia, *Etymologicum Magnum*, and Eustathius) connected the word etymologically with ἔτος/ἐτέω and gave the meaning 'proficient in speech'. This interpretation is well argued, on linguistic and contextual grounds, by A. Teffeteller Dale, *Glotta* 60, 1982, pp. 205-214. See further J. Russo, *A Commentary to Homer's Odyssey*, III, Oxford 1992, p. 55.

These qualities come close to the very ones that distinguished Odysseus' grandfather Autolykos as described at *Od.* 19. 395-398, 407-409: a man who used sharp practice (κλεπτοσύνη) and clever use of speech (in the form of oath) to gain advantage over everyone he met, so as to make himself strongly disliked by human society but a favorite of the god Hermes. It was Hermes who granted Autolykos these sharp qualities of mind (θεός δέ οἱ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν Ἑρμείας) and who stood by him as his divine patron (ὁ δέ οἱ πρόφρων ἄμ' ὀπήδει). Thus each deity, Athena and Hermes, has followed and fostered the career of a favourite mortal who was an ideal embodiment of the qualities essential to that deity, and the mortals happen to be grandfather and grandson. They share a strong family resemblance in mental acuity, but the grandfather leans toward the negative and is therefore "hated by many" (πολλοῖσιν. . . Ὀδυσσεύμενος, 19. 407), while the grandson leans toward the positive, a greatly admired Achaean hero whose 'shadow' side, and the 'odium' it provokes, remain largely hidden, but frequently hinted at and hauntingly emblematic in the very name he bears (τῷ δ' Ὀδυσσεὺς ὄνομ' ἔστω ἐπώνυμον)¹².

Thus we have another parallel between Athena and Hermes to add to the five listed above: 6) both are patrons of one member of the grandfather-grandson pair Autolykos-Odysseus, their patronage based on a shared interest in *metis*, the cunning use of intelligence.

Yet we might say that much like Hesiod's distinction between good *eris* and bad *eris*, these deities embody an intriguing distinction between good and bad *metis*: the first is the *metis* of successful campaigners, while the second is the *metis* of swindlers, equivalent to *dolos*. Thus if we were to diagram the relation of Athena to Hermes we might represent each as touching at a common center of cunning intelligence or *metis*, but reaching in opposite directions in their specialized application of this shared quality.



I suggest that this is no accident but one subtle aspect of the tendency toward systematic complementary distribution of qualities and activities of gods within the Olympian system, as conceived in the mythpoetic imagination shared

¹² Given Odysseus' Autolykan lineage and inauspicious name, we should find it surprising – and not an automatic 'given' of epic tradition – that he has been taken up by the preeminently 'good' goddess Athena, Zeus' favorite on Olympos. Under her patronage the man of many wiles has been rehabilitated as the much-suffering hero who ruled Ithaka benignly and yearns for his homecoming. For the theory that he was perhaps once Hermes' protégé, a bit more of a trickster and more dangerous than we find him in Homer's *Odyssey*, see Russo, 'A Jungian Analysis', cit. n. 7.

by Homer and the early poets. Furthermore, there is evidence for a relation between Athena and Hephaistos that is analogous to that between Athena and Hermes.

Again, we begin by asking what significant parallels or connections exist between Athena and Hephaistos. There are of course two interesting mythic tales that bring them together: Hephaistos' splitting open Zeus' head to release Athena¹³, and Hephaistos' attempted rape of Athena that led to the birth of Erichthonios¹⁴. But the first shows no common characteristic between the two gods, and the second emphasizes distance rather than connection: Hephaistos' attempt is rebuffed with disgust, and no relationship between the two continues. They do share one peculiarity of birth, in that each is the child of a single parent of the opposite sex, with Hera's birthing of Hephaistos presented as a retaliation against Zeus for his single begetting of Athena¹⁵.

But the truly significant connection between Athena and Hephaistos is in the fact that both deities control the realm of human craftsmanship, the cunning use of the hands to master and shape material into useful and decorative objects. A perfect statement of this convergence is in the Homeric Hymn to Hephaistos, which describes him as

ὄς μετ' Ἀθηναίης γλαυκώπιδος ἀγλαὰ ἔργα
ἀνθρώπους ἐδίδαξεν ἐπὶ χθονός. . . (H.H. 20. 2-3)

It is common in both literature and cult to find these two gods invoked or worshipped together as patrons and teachers of craftsmen¹⁶. Yet within this general similarity I believe we can discern a carefully nuanced difference, perfectly illustrated in Hesiod's account of the creation and adornment of Pandora. In both *Theogony* and *Works and Days* it is Hephaistos who does the essential shaping out of raw hard material, fashioning her out of earth,

γαίης γὰρ σύμπλασσε περικλυτὸς Ἀμφιγυήεις *Tb.* 571
αὐτίκα δ' ἐκ γαίης πλάσσε κλυτὸς Ἀμφιγυήεις *Op.* 70

while Athena specializes in the work of more delicate adornment, which Hephaistos then parallels in the final detail.

ζῶσε δὲ καὶ κόσμησε θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη
ἀργυφῆη ἐσθήτη· κατὰ κρήθεν δὲ καλύπτρην
δαίδαλέην χεῖρεσσι κατέσχεθε, θαῦμα ιδέσθαι·

¹³ Hes. *Tb.* 924-929 has Athena emerge unaided from Zeus' head, before Hephaistos is born from Hera. Hephaistos using an axe to release Athena is first depicted in literature in Pind., *Ol.* 7. 35-37, and becomes a familiar image in Greek vase-painting and sculpture.

¹⁴ For details see Apollod. 3. 14. 6, Hyg. *Fab.* 166. Good discussion in Gantz, *Myth*, cit. n. 8, I, pp. 77-78, who cites fragmentary evidence that suggests the story was known to earlier authors.

¹⁵ Hes. *Tb.* 924-929; *H. Apoll.* 312-317.

¹⁶ Solon fr. 1 Gent-Pr (=13W). 49 f.; Paus. 1. 14. 6; *Schol. Soph. Oed. Col.* 56.

ἀμφὶ δὲ οἱ στεφάνους νεοθλέας ἄνθεσι ποίης
 ἱμερτοῦς περίθηκε καρῆατι Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.
 ἀμφὶ δὲ οἱ στεφάνην χρυσέην κεφαλῆφιν ἔθηκε,
 τὴν αὐτὸς ποίησε, περικλυτὸς Ἀμφιγυΐεις
 ἀσκήσας παλάμησι, χαριζόμενος Διὶ πατρί. *Tb.* 573-580

The details reveal a subtle interplay of parallel and difference in the talent and activity characteristic of each divinity. Athena adorns Pandora with (soft) garlands, στεφάνους, of newly-bloomed flowers, and in the very next lines Hephaistos gives her a (hard) crown or headband, στεφάνην, of gold, which he has fashioned with his own hands. The nouns στέφανος and στεφάνη are close to synonymous, both having the root meaning 'that which crowns'; but Hesiod seems to have played upon their subtle distinction to bring out the crucial interplay of similarity and difference in the two gods' functions. Hephaistos, as goldsmith, both creates and bestows his metallic crown, while Athena's role is confined to embellishment with the homologous – and near-homonymous – garland.

The *Works and Days* version of the story presents serious inconsistencies between Zeus' instructions (60-68) and their implementation (70-82) in the fashioning of Pandora. Whatever the reason for these changes¹⁷, the roles of Hephaistos and Athena remain constant in their focus on hard versus soft material and basic creation versus ornamentation.

This subtle division of the powers of Athena and Hephaistos within the realm of technical craftsmanship is not always obligatory, but may turn up in unexpected places. We may see a variant in as local and specialized a source as the scholium on *Il.* 16. 140, commenting on the famous "Pelian ash-wood spear which Cheiron gave to his [Achilles'] father". The scholiast specifies that the centaur presented only the basic "well-grown wood", μελίαν εὐθαλή. Then it was smoothed or planed, ξέσαι, by Athena and "outfitted [as a spear]", κατασκευάσαι, by Hephaistos, which must mean the addition of a metal socket and point. The two gods of craftsmanship collaborate in the process, but each is given a distinct and specific *techne*: Athena controls the working of softer material, here wood, and Hephaistos the working of metal.

Of course distinctions of the sort I am proposing cannot always be solid and unambiguous; in a cultural construct like mythology, some degree of 'leakage' or overlap is expected. For example, in *Od.* 6. 232-5 = 23. 159-162, in the simile describing Athena's physical enhancement of Odysseus, the qualities of Athena and Hephaistos seem fully equated. Homer compares the goddess's action to the work performed by the skilled craftsman (ἀνὴρ ἱδρις) who overlays silver with gold, instructed by Hephaistos or Athena, who teach him "all kinds of crafts" (τέχνην παντοίην). We may note some rhetorical awkwardness in the comparison

¹⁷ See M.L. West, *Hesiod's Works and Days: a Commentary*, Oxford 1978, p. 161, for discussion of previous scholars' excision of certain verses and an argument for the authenticity of the entire passage.

of Athena's act of enhancement to that of a craftsman taught by Athena; and indeed, Homer may have felt that the redundancy was mitigated by naming two deities instead of Athena alone. Thus the avoidance of any distinction between the two gods' qualities may in fact be a conflation put to good purpose.

The distinction between Athena and Hephaistos in the realm of material *technai* may be seen as analogous to that between Athena and Ares in the realm of martial *technai*. Just as Hephaistos' special capacity is in heavy materials as distinct from light ones, and in fundamental construction as distinct from secondary ornamentation, so on the battlefield Ares' special capacity is in the basic element of aggressive force, while Athena's special capacity is for the intelligent strategy (or even trickery)¹⁸ that brings victory. The distinction between Athena and Ares as gods of battle is given almost allegorical elaboration by Homer in *Iliad* 5, where he has Athena intelligently guide Diomedes' spear against Ares' brute force, so that *metis* proves superior to *bie* and the mighty war-god is actually wounded by a less powerful but more tactically sophisticated opponent¹⁹.

Let me summarize the argument I have been making thus far. The goddess Athena, mysterious and complex in her origins, does not embody the same kind of clearly identifiable and 'essential' qualities that most other Olympians possess in early Greek literature. Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite, Ares, Hephaistos, Poseidon, Hades, Demeter, Dionysos and Hestia, for all their complexity, may be fairly straightforwardly identified with healing/plague, childbirth/wildlife/hunting, love/beauty, war, fire/metallurgy, the sea, the underworld, the earth, wine/ecstasy, and the hearth. Zeus and Hera may be readily understood as the principles of male and female sovereignty embodied in a king and queen of divinities, and Hera is therefore strongly identified with the revered authority of the idealized Greek wife. Of the remaining Olympians, Hermes is too complex and fluid for any such easy identification; and this is a complexity and elusiveness shared by Athena. For all her familiarity to the ancient Greeks and to modern readers of their literature, the grey-eyed goddess remains essentially hard to pin down in any 'essential nature'. And this, I submit, is because her nature is fundamentally *aspectual* rather than *essential*. She is not characterized by any one 'essence' so much as she is by the *specialized aspect of an essential quality possessed by some other divinity*. Thus she is the lighter and more 'feminine' side of Hephaistos' craftsmanship, the nimbly intelligent and more strategic side of Ares' war-strength, and the more respectable side (*metis*) of Hermes' trickery (*kleptosyne*).

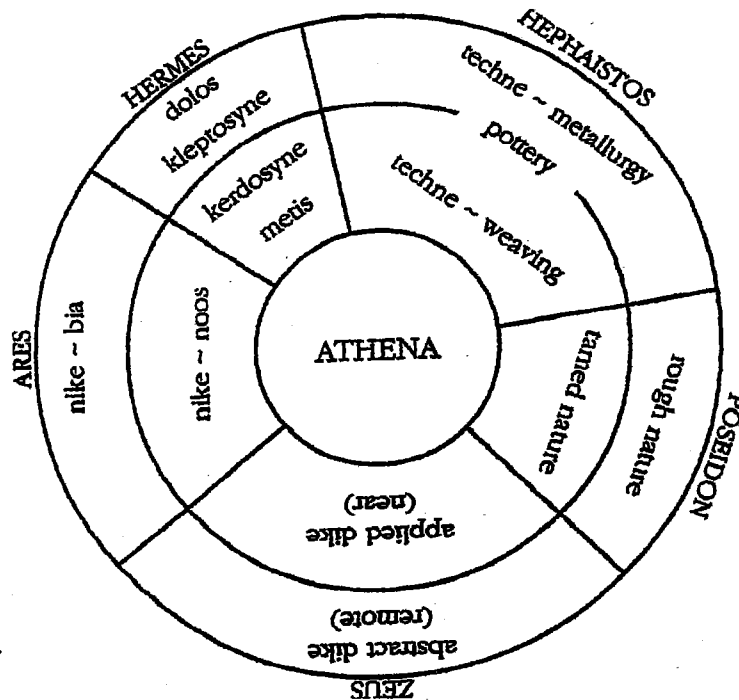
Once we begin thinking of Athena in such a 'relational' way, we may add further correspondences to both Poseidon and Zeus. Burkert has already noticed 'the force of civilization' that distinguishes Athena from Poseidon (and in one detail from Hermes): "Poseidon violently sires the horse, Athena bridles it and

¹⁸ Note her deception of Hektor in *Il.* 22, called *κερδοσύνη* by Homer at 247; and Hektor's complaint, *ἐμὲ δ' ἔξαπάτησεν Ἀθήνη*, at 299.

¹⁹ *Il.* 5. 851-857.

builds the chariot; Poseidon excites the waves, Athena builds the ship; Hermes may multiply the flock, Athena teaches the use of wool²⁰. We may go still further and adduce those cases where Zeus wills a 'just' theodicy or resolution – as in the *Odyssey* and the *Oresteia* – and Athena serves to implement his Olympian will in the specific details of civic order and social practice. In dramas like the *Ajax* and the *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, she is the divine figure who is able to translate the abstraction of cosmic justice into the actuality of social order, functioning as if the surrogate on earth of Zeus, or at least of Olympos (since Zeus' will is not explicitly mentioned in these texts). Her role in these literary works vividly recalls Otto's epitomization of Athena as "the goddess of nearness"²¹.

These relationships may be diagrammed thus:



²⁰ W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1985, p. 141.

²¹ Above, n. 9.

Athena and Hermes in Early Greek Poetry

Among the various relationships we have reviewed between Athena and another god, that with Hermes seems most developed because these are the two Olympians most active in intervening in human affairs. The nature of the eternally mutable and elusive god Hermes may never be fully fathomed, or even adequately described²². As for his sometime counterpart Athena, whose multiple identities have been identified as Mycenaean citadel-goddess, snake-goddess, patron of Athens, goddess of wisdom, and patron of handicrafts, the interpretation presented here suggests still another identity. Athena is the divinity who may share, or 'double', the *bte*, *techne*, and *metis* of Ares, Hephaistos, and Hermes, and perhaps even the gifts of Poseidon and the *dike* of Zeus; but at the same time has the special ability to transform them, by joining complementarity with difference, into subtler and finer versions.

²² Burkert, *Greek Religion*, cit. n. 20, pp. 156-159, does a characteristically good job of encompassing Hermes' multifarious complexity within a short chapter; but even here, no 'key' to Hermes' nature emerges. Earlier studies (N.O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief*, Wisconsin 1947; J.S. Chittenden, *Hesperia* 16, 1947, pp. 69-114, *Amer. Journ. Arch.* 52, 1948, pp. 24-33; H. Herter, *Rhein. Mus.* 119, 1976, pp. 193-241; L. Kahn, *Hermès passe*, Paris 1979) share no unified vision. Like a true trickster, this mercurial figure continually refuses to stand still and be 'known'.